Atriplex australasica

COMMON NAMES
orache, saltbush

BIOSTATUS
Native

CURRENT CONSERVATION STATUS
2023 | At Risk – Relict | Qualifiers: RR, SO
Jump to previous conservation statuses

CATEGORY
Vascular

STRUCTURAL CLASS
Herbs - Dicotyledons other than Composites

FLOWER COLOURS
Green

DETAILED DESCRIPTION
Annual much-branched, grey-green, glaucous to red-green, monoecious (?gynodioecious) shrub up to 1 × 2 m. **Main stems** quadrangular, widely spreading to sub-erect, woody at base, otherwise firmly fleshy to succulent; deeply ribbed, stout up to 15 mm diameter, grey-green to glaucous at first becoming purple-red to maroon with age. **Upper stems** similar, though much branched, ribbed and more or less slender. **Petioles** stout, fleshy up to 20 mm long. **Leaves** 20–100 × 30–60 mm, grey-green, glaucous to red-green, very fleshy to almost succulent, broadly lanceolate, broadly-deltoid to broadly hastate, lamina of young plants more or less entire, usually with 1–2 deep forward projected lobes near base, these often present on one side, mature leaves entire or deeply though irregularly lobed to almost coarsely dentate, lobes broadly deltoid blunt ended, forward projecting; leaf-base broadly cuneate; apex obtuse, sub-obtuse to acute. **Inflorescence leaves** similar though smaller. **Inflorescence** long, spiciform, paniculate more or less arching and pendulous at fruiting. **Flowers** in dense glomerules, these at first continuous, become disjunct; upper glomerules usually subtended by small bract-like leaves. **Male flowers** with perianths 0.5–1 mm long; segments green with fine hyaline margin. **Female flowers** enclosed by bracteoles 1.5–1.8–(2) mm long at anthesis, sessile, rhombic-triangular to triangular hastate, usually entire, sometimes toothed or with protuberances. **Fruiting bracteoles** 3–4 × 2–5 mm, deltoid, fused near base, equal to subequal, entire or with 1–2 teeth, smooth or with warty protuberances, very fleshy, grey-green to glaucous at first becoming black and much-thickened with age, apices acute. **Fruits** dimorphic, enclosed within bracteoles, mostly 2.5–4 mm diameter, orbicular, laterally flattened, radicle basal, horizontal; pericarp loose, chartaceous often ruptured at fruit maturation. **Testa** glossy black, smooth.

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Chatham Islands. Photographer: Peter J de Lange, Licence: CC BY-NC.

SIMILAR TAXA
Atriplex patula L. with which it has been confused in New Zealand literature. It should be noted that many botanists regard both species as the same, in which case *A. patula* has priority. From *A. patula* s.s., *A. australasica* differs consistently by its much wider, often deeply toothed or lobed leaves. In immature or juvenile plants the leaves are often entire or lobed 1–2 times near the base. However, from the typical form of *A. patula* seen in New Zealand, *A. australascia* differs by its more robust stature and much more fleshy-glaucous foliage.

DISTRIBUTION
Indigenous. New Zealand: South Island (known from a 1770 collection from the Marlborough Sounds, possibly from two 1860 collections made from south Canterbury by Haast and Kirk), Chatham Islands (abundant). Also Australia (southern coast) and Tasmania.

HABITAT
Strictly coastal. On the Chatham Islands it is usually found in open habitats such as along sand, shell, cobble or boulder beaches bordering the lagoon, on clay banks and cliff faces throughout the main island, particularly where near shag roosts, and commonly amongst sea-bird colonies and seal haul outs.

THREATS
Uncertain. Only recently rediscovered on the Chatham Islands where it is very common.

GENUS
Atriplex

FAMILY
Amaranthaceae

AUTHORITY
Atriplex australasica Moq.

SYNONYMS
Atriplex patula var. gunnii Aellen, A. patula var. serratifolia Aellen

ENDEMIC TAXON
No

ENDEMIC GENUS
No

ENDEMIC FAMILY
No

FLOWERING
November–April

FRUITING
December–May

LIFE CYCLE AND DISPERSAL
Spongy nutlet dispersed by water and possibly also wind and granivory (Thorsen et al., 2009).

PROPAGATION TECHNIQUE
Unknown. However probably easily grown from fresh seed and semi-hardwood cuttings.

ETYMOLOGY
atriplex: From an ancient Latin name whose derivation is uncertain, but a possible explanation is the name comes from the Greek a- ‘without’ and traphein ‘nourishment’ because many of these species grow in arid desert soils
australasica: Of or from Australasia

NVS CODE
ATRAUS

CHROMOSOME NUMBER
2n = 36-38

PREVIOUS CONSERVATION STATUSES

2017 | At Risk – Relict | Qualifiers: RR, SO
2012 | At Risk – Naturally Uncommon | Qualifiers: RR, SO
2009 | At Risk – Relict | Qualifiers: SO, RR
2004 | Non-resident Native – Vagrant
Jump to current conservation status

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Thorsen MJ, Dickinson KJM, Seddon PJ. 2009. Seed dispersal systems in the New Zealand flora. *Perspectives in Plant Ecology, Evolution and Systematics 11*: 285–309. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ppees.2009.06.001.

ATTRIBUTION

Fact sheet and description prepared for the NZPCN by P.J. de Lange July 2007

NZPCN FACT SHEET CITATION

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MORE INFORMATION

https://www.nzpcn.org.nz/flora/species/atriplex-australasica/

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27 May 2026